

Steven McRae

PRINCIPAL DANCER, THE ROYAL BALLET

interviewed by David Bain

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London, 8 December 2010.

David Bain welcomed Steven and suggested he began by telling us what happened after his last talk to us almost four years ago when he was due to go back to the Prix de Lausanne and was hoping it would be a happier experience than when he'd entered the competition. Steven said it all seemed a lifetime ago. This time he was there as a guest and it was fascinating to be on the other side. Normally he'd have been excited and get a buzz, but he felt sick walking in when he saw the kids warming up as he knew what they were feeling and what they were going through. Most need the prizes and scholarships as they're not already at a ballet school and they really feel their whole life hinges on the competition. He just wanted to hug them. There's not the same pressure once you're in a company and performing, but dancing in competition is very different.

It was interesting listening to the judges, about 12-14 in all including Monica Zamora and Wyn Brooks, as they looked for different things. Some wanted technique, some wanted to see a natural dancer, some wanted musicality, and some looked for physique. Steven said he'd been on panels recently for Young British Dancer of the Year and other competitions and he'd love to be on that panel. Judges don't always come to a unanimous decision which is probably a good thing as otherwise dancers would just be clones. He loves our company so is probably biased – our corps is wonderful as, unlike some companies where they all look exactly the same, they are individuals who work as a group.

Coming back from Prix de Lausanne in 2007, Steven said it was August and the beginning of the season, he was on a mission, he'd been promoted to Soloist and he wanted everything. One Saturday he was in his flat when the phone rang at midnight and it was Roberta Marquez asking if he could come to Paris tomorrow to partner her in *Don Q* as Ivan Putrov didn't feel well! Steven said they'd need to get Monica's permission so they called her at 7am on the Sunday to explain the situation. She phoned Steven, asked if he'd packed his bag (which he had!), and said he could go, so off he went on

Eurostar at about 9am. He'd never before done *Don Q* or ever touched Roberta so on the train he was watching YouTube with the music going and effectively rehearsing with Roberta over the phone. What his fellow passengers made of his antics is unclear! Arriving in Paris at 1pm he had to prepare for the show starting at 2pm but there were parades everywhere and the taxi got stuck in traffic so he arrived at the theatre 15 minutes before curtain up (luckily *Don Q* was at the end of the gala!)

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Roberta was already in costume, they had a short time trying things out together before Steven got made up and they had to go on and perform in front of couples from lots of other eminent companies. But he loved it and he'll never forget the trust that Roberta, who is the ultimate professional, showed in him. He's so grateful to be dancing with her now.

This proved to be the beginning of so many things. Monica said he should learn *Romeo*. A day later, Johan Kobborg was injured and Steven had to be ready to perform it in a week so he spent every night watching the DVD. It was the most incredible experience. It's not just a question of learning a pas de deux – there are all the solos, and interaction with other cast members, there are sword fights, running in and out of the set, using capes and masks. After four days he had a stage rehearsal running the whole ballet. He'd never before done a leading role in a three act ballet, which is very different from a triple bill, but he became addicted to the feeling that he was leading this incredible ballet and he really felt like Romeo. Alina was his first Juliet and luckily they had done some galas and pas de deux before. The day before the show, Monica called him in to say he had to fly to Tokyo the day after *Romeo* to do *The*

Dream with Alina but not to worry about that just now, concentrate on Romeo! Unbeknown to him, his family had come over, although his sister was about to give birth, and when the curtain came down he saw them standing in the wings – luckily they made it home for the baby’s arrival. Once the show was finished Monica said congratulations and handed him the DVD so he could learn the role of Oberon on the plane. After celebrating his first night of Romeo with dinner, he got home at about 1am, packed for Japan, and was at the airport at 10am to fly to Tokyo alone as Alina went to dance elsewhere beforehand. He had five days to learn the role (rehearsing with a Japanese girl) but only one day with Alina after which they did three shows of *The Dream*. Anthony Dowell worked with him one-on-one for hours with Christopher Carr’s help. He went straight to the studio from the airport having watched the DVD several times en route! The air-hostess thought he was mad with his laptop and performing various movements. Anthony is phenomenal as a coach. He would say you’ve done enough but Steven wanted to go on and on from the top. Asked what singles Anthony out, Steven said he still has a dancer’s mentality and coaches you as if he is still dancing the role. He really wants to pass on his knowledge without suggesting you copy him. He’ll be coming back later this season to work with Steven on other roles.

On his return from Japan, the body was starting to react. He went straight on to do the mandolin dance for the filming of *Romeo* with Tamara Rojo and Carlos Acosta as well as his corps roles, and also *Nutcracker* and *Patineurs* by which time his Achilles was starting to freak out but he ignored the pain and carried on. At the beginning of February they were doing *Chroma* and he couldn’t put his heel to the floor. Limping, he got through the show and afterwards saw doctors in Harley Street who did scans and said to rest. He came back working on *Homage to the Queen* and Steven was doing a stage rehearsal of *Fire* when his calf muscle snapped and he had to be carried from the stage, was taken to the physio room and thence to hospital. The calf was taking a load of what the Achilles should have been taking. No-one mentioned the Achilles although he kept talking about the pain and saw three different doctors but they said the calf would be OK after about six weeks.

He was trying to get back as he was cast to do the *Dream* with Roberta here in London but the pain was still there so the Opera House physio said he should see a Swedish doctor who comes over once a month and is great with tendons. He did an ultrasound and said Steven’s Achilles had been slowly tearing to 50% and if he jumped it would snap, the elasticity would go and he would have a permanent limp. Steven went into shock but the doctor said if he trusted and took his advice it would be alright in the end. He didn’t want to operate but said it would be better to let it heal naturally which

would take longer so Steven sat it out for four or five months. It was heartbreaking. He had wedges under his heels and each month the wedge got smaller but Monica who could see his frustration promoted him to First Soloist nonetheless. He went back to Australia for two and a half months, spent time with his nephew and came back into very slow rehabilitation. He wasn’t allowed to do pliés, and had eight weeks of barre coaching with Lesley Collier, trying to keep sane and be creative. He learned a good deal about his body and did a lot of Pilates which he still carries on. He should have done Lescaut to Laura Morera’s *Manon* but wasn’t quite ready so his first ballet coming back was *Nutcracker* with Yuhui Choe in December, the day after his birthday.

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He was glad to have had that time to step back and look at what he was doing. You are a dancer, you aren’t curing cancer or solving the world debt, so life goes on and when you can’t do it, someone else steps in. From the injury he’s learned about his body and certain weaknesses but there are ways of fixing the problems. Doctors are now doing research into this but he was given cortisone injections in the region of the Achilles which might have made it worse. *The Nutcracker* with Yuhui was a good start back as it’s classical and pure. He did a few nephews and also *Patineurs*. At the end of the season he was promoted to Principal which was the happiest day of his life. He didn’t know what he’d done to warrant this promotion but Steven believes the injury made him want to come back better and stronger and he listened to the doctor and trusted the physios and Pilates instructor so perhaps Monica knew he was serious.

During the summer 2009, on the tour to Granada, he thought he had picked up a cold but once in Cuba discovered it was swine flu. They were in the Cuban dance school with Loipa Araujo whom Steven adores but everyone was dropping like flies, the temperature was 45 degrees, they were rehearsing *Chroma* full out and Monica was running around finding people to take over. She asked him to do the pas de deux from *Romeo* with Roberta. They rehearsed in the studio and that afternoon was the final stage call but Steven had some lunch, stood up and he was stuck – his joints just locked. Loipa gave him a tablet which she said was some Spanish drug and he was ready to go on! He did *Chroma* full out, spreading the germs but that night felt he’d been hit by a truck. Lizzie (Harrod, now his fiancée) was sent out of their room at midnight as they thought she had swine flu. At breakfast he must have looked rough and Kevin O’Hare took him off, told him to go to his hotel room and not to come out again. He stayed locked in there for

three days. Eventually Lizzie was allowed back as they both had the same symptoms. Marianela Nuñez, Iohna Loots, Cindy Jourdain and David Pickering were also affected. They were told they should go to hospital (they preferred a firing squad to that as some of the conditions there aren't good) but Kevin had a talk with some government officials, and they were offered a house, were looked after wonderfully with meals prepared for them and Kevin and Andrew Hurst were great at visiting and keeping an eye on them. Meanwhile, the shows went on without them. They were taking Tamiflu which was starting to upset people and a week later Steven had to fly home to perform with Carlos in his show at the Coliseum. They were told not to mention swine flu to any journalist but when he changed planes in Madrid, Steven looked at a newspaper and saw a picture on the front page of Marianela as a swan and a headline saying that the Royal Ballet had swine flu! He lost several kilos with the Tamiflu which made him so ill. He hadn't danced for over a week but got back to London with one day to spare, and did six shows with Carlos which nearly killed him but Carlos was very generous and understanding.

One thing which might have helped his promotion to Principal was performing Johan Kobborg's choreography in the Linbury. Steven said any dancer would say that to have something created on them was the best feeling. Johan has clever ideas and knows how to play to Steven's strengths and it was a work of genius. It was also great working with Sergei Polunin and Alina. Charlie Siem, the violinist, was phenomenal. He came in looking really scruffy but produced a violin which was worth millions and suddenly played an amazing piece going ping, pong and that was what Johan wanted in the dance. It was a nice feeling to be on stage again. Asked how much was Johan and how much Steven's idea of the dance, Steven said it was all Johan's work as he has very clear ideas, though you can offer some suggestions. He works in a different way from Wayne McGregor who makes you feel as if you're completing an algebra quiz! There are very complicated counts facing in different directions and this is then done in reverse which is a challenge but you just have to throw yourself into it. He's now working with Chris Wheeldon on Alice which is great. Chris is more classical with a clear idea of what he wants, though sometimes if you throw yourself around he says he likes it but to do it in a certain way.

This season he's worked with Carlos here and recently went back to Cuba and saw him working there. Steven said Carlos is such a huge star but when you sit and talk to him he is so generous. Occasionally, he just watches in class and gives advice or tricks to help you which is all so valuable. This helped too with *Theme and Variations* where he offered advice and told how Misha Baryshnikov did it. He's really a generation above Steven and could just sit back on his laurels but

he doesn't. Seeing him in his home environment and how well respected he is, it's incredible to realise what he has achieved and what he still is achieving. He still has ambitions and aspirations and has so much to give. He should be back in London soon, following a tour of Cuba with his predominantly modern choreography, and it will be interesting to know what the Cubans make of it.

In summer 2009, he went home to recover as he was so weak and ill but came back to his first season as Principal having no idea what would happen. He had been cast in some shows but ended up doing 60 which was incredible and he couldn't have asked for more. He'd recently said to Lizzie that if by chance something should happen to him now and he had to stop dancing at least he could say he'd had one incredible season. He had danced with just about every principal woman (except Zenaïda Yanowsky!) including Miyako Yoshida, Roberta, Alina, Tamara Rojo and Sarah Lamb, had done lots of debuts and because of injuries he was getting four or five shows of each ballet with different partners which makes you a better and stronger dancer. Redoing *Romeo*, it was good to discover certain aspects

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which he'd not had time for before. He'd done it with Roberta in London and Miyako and Roberta in Japan. David asked what effect dancing with different Juliets had on his partnering. Steven said you were dealing with different physiques as although small they were built differently. Watching Roberta rehearsing Act 3 in the studio made him cry as she was so into it and it is a real skill to make someone do that. He misses Miyako who was very generous and he learned so much from her. She taught him little partnering tricks and he really adores and admires her, describing her as a real lady. Watching how she planned her 10 days between arriving here and the performance was interesting and her solid technique is incredible. Doing *Nutcracker* with Miyako, which was filmed, was a career highlight. She is the ultimate Sugar Plum Fairy. In her last *Cinderella* there were certain things which were the best she ever did but he wouldn't give away her tricks! She's at a different stage in her career and life and had a history of back problems and you have to partner her differently to prevent further trouble. Roberta has a very flexible back so you can dance in a different way. Artistically you get three different shows though he hasn't done a show with Alina this

season. Roberta and he are close and they work on that relationship. It's hard not to bow down to Miyako whom he adores in a different way. Jonny and Lesley used to laugh at him in the studio because he was so awestruck! There's more than a 20 year age gap and she would say he could be her son but she has to be in love with him. He's just seen a video from Japan where she looks 16 in the role and Steven looks the older of the two!

Highlights of his career so far. Definitely *Nutcracker* with Miyako but the whole season was incredible as the relationship developed with Roberta performing full length ballets as well as galas. You benefit from having a regular partner whom you trust and you can play more with the roles. He's done some great ballets – a day's notice for *Fille* with Alina because Johan hurt his hand was a challenge but he now loves that role and found lots of things in the character which he wants to develop and improve. The way he plays *Romeo* now is different

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from three years ago. You have to keep the boy inside you while he himself is growing up and the portrayal will continue to change. *Concerto* was a challenge and revealing. It was also being filmed which will live on. Christopher Carr tells them 'it's there for life and your grandchildren will see this.' You get a different performance and see people being very safe in front of the cameras. Steven prefers to be more daring but when the cameras are running you don't want to throw yourself around so you do the textbook version and sometimes that can take away the edge. They don't get 10 takes and only cut if absolutely necessary.

His relationship with Roberta has become very special. Steven said she steps on the stage and loves it. Rehearsals are fun, they both want to achieve something and they laugh at and with each other. They go to the studio after a performance realising the good things but working on the less good bits and Roberta embraces that and with experience you build up a trust and can push the boundaries further. This happens with a regular partnership. He has done three Lenskys this season and enjoyed working with Reid Andersson. He was a hard taskmaster, making you go over and over just one step for 30 minutes until he was happy and then ask you to repeat it a few more times in exactly the same way. He was on the Prix de Lausanne panel when Steven did it. In *Theme and Variations*, Alina was injured so Sarah learned it in two days. It's a hard ballet to do and she was phenomenal looking as if she'd danced it for months. She is lovely to partner – calm and

secure. They are doing some Balanchine ballets together now. He recently went back to Cuba, where he danced some tap solos and *Beauty* pas de deux with Roberta. Now it's *Cinderella*, *Patineurs*, *Manon*, and *Swan Lake*. He can't wait for *Manon*. Today he'd just done a *Swan Lake* scene with the cadets and the queen. Commenting that it was rather soon as the performance isn't till April he was told it was the only time he'd get. *Rhapsody* is wonderful – a pity there's no Baryshnikov around but Lesley is still there and it will be with Alina. He doesn't count how many shows he has before the season starts because it depends on health and accidents, but waits till afterwards to know how many he's done.

Steven's other activities include being on the judging panel of competitions. Education and working with children is a great interest. Since he has been in London he has had a good relationship with Gailene Stock and he thanks her always because she brought him to London from the Prix and supported him in his career and beyond. He likes to be involved with the school because the connection is important and you learn the most by watching dancers dance. He goes whenever he can and coaches sometimes. He recently spent a day at White Lodge having heard lots of stories and wanted to see what it was about. Gailene has done wonders in the School and he was blown away. A child enters the school believing he or she can achieve anything, and becomes unstoppable. It is a shame that as an 11 year old you don't realise your wonderful opportunities. You should soak up everything from the incredible teachers and coaches and working with the Company which is great for the young. He also sat in on their academic studies and would like to be involved on that side too. He also wants to direct. Meanwhile he has been doing an Open University degree in business management and leadership for the past two years. He applied for it while he was off injured as he realised he would have to have another string to his bow. It's a challenge in time management. He'd love to give something back. In Australia there are so many kids who are never going to have the experience he's had in London and elsewhere and he'd love to give those children the Macmillan and Ashton rep. He wants to direct and has told everyone that, so is prepared to do the necessary work. It's fascinating – a paper he was just reading said a true leader can admit their faults and seek help and realise they can't do everything. He's not applying for Monica's job just yet! He's only ever had one director – Monica – who has given him an incredible chance and he's so grateful and really loves their open and honest relationship and he can pick her brains when he wants. He would hope for the same with the new director, his next boss, who will play a big part in his career and those who are just coming into the Company. On timing he has no idea when the announcement will be made. This time next year it may come out but this would be very late from the dancer's viewpoint. A direc-

tor might not want you in the Company, for example if they only wanted tall dancers Steven and Roberta would have an issue and be out of the door. It could happen.

When Steven last came to speak to us he'd done dancing roles with no major acting involved. He said he loves the story lines and loves being a prince and wishes he was royalty! He has seen a lot of people who are cardboard cut-outs but a prince is a real person too. With Romeo the steps make sense when you have a character and become that person. There are reasons for doing certain steps in Romeo, for example in the ball-room scene, which affect the role itself. The three hour journey of the character in Romeo is a challenge as he changes throughout. Steven says he can't wait for *Manon* – it'll be hard work but fun as Des Grieux who he sees as a young college boy.

Questions from members:

Steven was asked about the film at the Lowry Exhibition of him performing in *Job*. He and Robert Parker did the *Job* solo for the Royal Ballet stone unveiling at Westminster Abbey and some footage was needed for the exhibition so this was filmed at the Opera House about a year ago.

On working with Miyako in her farewell *Cinderella*, Steven said they went right to the top of the staircase because Miyako is like a textbook so if she goes up there you go up there too. He tells students that if you want to know how things should be done then you choose Miyako as the model.

About opportunities for doing tap, Steven said he's tapping at a charity gala at the Apollo on 9 January. He also did some in Cuba. At a lot of galas they like *Don Q* but also like something different so there's another opportunity. He also has some tap as the Mad Hatter in *Alice*. There's only one Mad Hatter so far but some others are learning it.

If he wasn't with the Royal Ballet where would Steven like to be? He thought he'd like to be in New York for a while with New York City Ballet as he loves Balanchine and Robbins but his heart is at the Royal Ballet.

He saw some other performers in Cuba such as NYCB, ABT and other guests in the same galas as himself. You meet some great people whom he has only seen on video before. The Havana festival is hard core – three shows a day. Some are doing *Swan Lake* at 5pm and another big piece in the gala at 8.30 which is tough. Steven doesn't normally read reviews unless someone points them out but he and Roberta had been picked out positively in some reviews for the Act 3 *Beauty pas de deux*. It's not the flashiest piece but very special as it is very Royal Ballet. The Cubans appreciated seeing our style – their version is very different.

Asked how guesting works, Steven said each circumstance is different. They either contact you directly or contact the Company asking for two dancers for a certain date and the Company decides. Guesting is great as you can learn a lot from other companies and bring it back and more and more you appreciate what we have at the Royal Ballet. The quality of work is far and above most of the other world class companies.

In giving enormous thanks to Steven for a very interesting and entertaining evening, David said that when he last talked to us Steven said he looked forward to coming back in a few years and telling us what he'd been doing. Now we too will look forward to the next time he comes with an update on his activities.

Report written by Liz Bouttell, corrected by Steven McRae and David Bain ©The Ballet Association 2010.